

Preventive measures crucial in warding off seasonal flu

Editor's note: This is the second in a three-part series on seasonal flu. This virus kills 30,000 to 35,000 people living in the United States annually. This article deals with measures we all can do to prevent getting it.

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Probably the best way to not get the seasonal flu is to just stay home and watch TV.

But a social distancing lifestyle is not going to work in modern times because people must go to work, take care of their kids, and go to the store for groceries. And, people like to get out and have fun.

Because of this, illnesses can easily be transferred amongst the population, including seasonal flu. But, that doesn't mean you have to get it, said Fort Hood's top preventive medicine officer, Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center.

Maj. Troy Ross, chief of Preventive Medicine, said there are many preventive measures people can take to help ward off the flu despite the continuous stream of people coming and going in American society.

The No. 1 measure the public can do to prevent getting the flu is good hygiene practices, Ross said.

"Wash your hands and stay away from people while you are coughing and sneezing," Ross said. Using alcohol sanitizers on your hands are a good to prevent germs from spreading and should be part of one's daily routine, he added.

Seasonal flu, which is a viral infection, is usually spread when a person rubs his eyes or scratches his nose, Ross explained, which allows the virus to enter the body through the membranes of those areas.

From a health care provider's perspective, the No. 1 prevention measure is vaccination, Ross said.

"The primary health care intervention is to get the vaccination out there into our community at high levels," he said.

Next is encouraging people to use proper cough etiquette.

Ross explained that people should not place their hand by their mouth when coughing, but instead cough into the crook of the elbow. This way, the hand can't be a "route or transmission of that virus," he said, as in shaking hands or grabbing door handles.

Another measure, while foreign to American culture, is for those who have the flu to wear masks to prevent the germs from spreading. "It's a good thing to be open to the idea of people wearing masks," Ross said, citing Asian cultures being much more receptive to this practice.

Ross said there are plans to have masks available at Fort Hood health care facilities this upcoming flu season. "It's really a way to keep someone sick from spreading it" when they are in the clinic or hospital, he said.

The virus is usually spread through droplets produced by sneezing or coughing. By not stopping the droplets properly, they will be suspended in air for a short while for a nearby person to inhale and get the virus, he said.

And, a virus can live on a hard surface (door handle) for a few hours.

Instead of being viewed as a freak or robber, those wearing masks should be revered for their efforts in trying to prevent spreading illness, Ross said.

“It’s going to be a hard sell because it’s not part of our culture. It makes you stand out and feel weird. People (will) question what you’re doing if you’re running around with a mask on.”

And finally, if you have the flu, you need to distance yourself from group settings.

Ross said large open areas like malls and venues of sporting events are a lower risk for spreading the disease since there is good air flow in those places. However, offices and classrooms are risk areas for spread.

“Your sneeze is going to spread droplets in an area where someone can breathe it in,” Ross said. So, the best thing to do is stay home until the fever is gone.

Asked if the Soldier lifestyle of regular exercise and three square meals a day makes them less prone to catching the flu, Ross said “no, not really.”

He explained that 10 to 15 percent of the susceptible population will get infected annually with different people during different years getting it.

The vaccination is available in shot and nasal spray form. The spray form is a fairly new development.

One advantage of it, Ross said, is that also stimulates an immune response in the nose and upper airways offering a little better protection, studies have shown.

And, from an environmental perspective, it’s better because no needles need to be discarded, he said. “On our side, logistically, it’s much easier to give the nose spray rather than doing the injectors.”

Either method, Ross said, does fine to prevent and stop the illness from spreading.

Probably the biggest change the Army should consider is for leaders to agree that Soldiers shouldn’t come to Physical Training or the work place sick, Ross said.

Ross said there is nothing macho or Soldierly about someone who is genuinely sick trying to perform as if they’re not and in the process spread germs to others.

“It (the flu) has the potential to be more serious for an individual. But more importantly, it could have an impact on the whole workforce,” he said, explaining that there’ll probably be more lost workdays and lost mission effectiveness as more people get sick from one individual. “Overall, we’re going to be more effective in being able to get our jobs done when we stop the spread” of the virus.

Ross clarified the point that while health care providers make “recommendations” to commanders and supervisors to keep a Soldier home, it’s ultimately the supervisor’s decision.

“It’s the leadership’s decision to make,” Ross said. “A smart leader could see that (flu illness) in one of his workers and Soldiers and say ‘Hey, you need to stay home.’”

“It doesn’t have to take the intervention of a health care provider to be involved in stopping that illness in the work place,” he added.

Soldiers should contact their supervisors to let them know they’re going on sick call for an illness and then immediately let them know what medical personnel

determined. Depending on the sickness and symptoms, a day or two off is maybe just what is needed, Ross said.

Leaders need to “take a broader focus on what the mission is – importance of having the group be mission effective. You (the supervisor need to) take the leadership role in stopping the potential consequences” of a virus spreading,” Ross said.

Next week, the third article will focus on seasonal flu treatment for family members and medical professionals.